

RE: Opposition to HB 7192 and any similar bills including but not limited to related bills SB738, SB457, SB874, SB454, HB7319 or any changes that would result in the creation of a commission with the purpose of consolidation and regionalization of school districts and establish school districts as separate School Taxation Districts.

To Members of the Planning and Development Committee, and all other interested parties:

As a parent and a Realtor, I strongly oppose HB 7192 and any other bills that propose to create an appointed commission with the sole purpose of developing a plan for the redistricting or consolidation of school services and school districts in CT. Among the many other objectionable provisions, the bill would create an unelected commission with 15 of 17 members appointed by the Governor and Democrat Leadership (authors and sponsors of this bill and others covering proposed consolidation). The commission would be specifically tasked to look only at school consolidation, and that will ultimately result in taking away each individual town's ability to control the educational services that it provides.

\* The majority of people moving to New Canaan are coming for the schools.

Per WalletHub rankings, published in a Forbes Article in July 2018 (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/reneemorad/2018/07/31/states-with-the-best-public-school-systems/#4305033b3897>) CT was ranked #3 in Education when compared to all other states in the US. The quality of the local schools is one of the major reasons that people and businesses move to and stay in CT. Public school education in CT is a local affair, managed town by the local boards of education and with budget approval from local town government and not by a state legislated regional bureaucracy. Each town is tasked with balancing the needs of its' constituents in the community, while providing a quality education on behalf of their youngest residents. Education is in local hands, this has been successful, and CT is ranked #3 in the country, so please don't fix something that is not broken.

\* The high-quality education and cost efficiency of our schools is the result of the checks and balances that our local Board of Education, New Canaan town government and the parent community provide. The budget process has multiple steps and the Board of Education must obtain approval of its budget from the Board of Finance and Town Council. This rigorous process, along with parental involvement is the key to the success and our district. Taking that local control of education away through consolidation or redistricting and making our Board of Education a separate taxing entity reporting only to Hartford will have a detrimental impact on the quality and character of our schools, limit community involvement in local schools and

curtail efforts to control costs in the School Budgeting. This bill will silence the voices of parents and reduce parents' influence and engagement.

\* In stark contrast, Hartford does not have a good track record for managing the state's finances. CT was ranked as a state in worse financial condition than 48 other states by the Mercatus Center at George Mason University in Oct., 2018 (see <https://www.mercatus.org/statefiscalrankings>). CT has many, many problems and Hartford should focus on fixing the areas that are not functioning instead of destroying the lifeblood of CT, its' schools. Why does Hartford, which thus far has done a terrible job managing the fiscal affairs of CT, think that taking control of the funding of the local school systems will benefit the state as a whole? The only way this benefits the state is as a money grab, by creating regional school taxing districts that would saddle the suburban town residents with paying for failing inner city schools while receiving reduced funding for their own schools. Rather, based on comments at the recent hearing March 1, 2019 in the Education Committee, the end goal of these consolidation bills is an attempt at some sort of equalization of education, (and likely other conditions like property values) across the entire state. We see this misguided effort for what it is, a tear down, rather than a building up.

\* There is no evidence that any meaningful savings can be achieved through consolidations or that there could be any improvement in outcomes based on the study by the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving ([http://www.hfpg.org/files/1815/2595/9230/Hartford\\_Foundation\\_K-12\\_Regionization\\_Report\\_05-08-18.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2EfWi7KkKNNNeZkE1RpWyvsNyYPpU4435CCLfoYlj6mnTv2RIUTrROU\\_H4](http://www.hfpg.org/files/1815/2595/9230/Hartford_Foundation_K-12_Regionization_Report_05-08-18.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2EfWi7KkKNNNeZkE1RpWyvsNyYPpU4435CCLfoYlj6mnTv2RIUTrROU_H4)). But the sponsors of these bills already know that. The illusion of cost savings is enticing, but patently unsupportable, and in any case, extremely unlikely in the hands of a government with a rich history of bloat, mismanagement, special interests, and wasteful spending.

\* I urge you to vote against this bill. The vague language it contains (by design) is a Trojan Horse and creates an appointed commission with unlimited powers which will make decisions that are not subject to a vote by the legislature. Why shield this abomination from a vote? To give the politicians that support it cover. It is clear that this bill will not just look at saving on administration costs in smaller districts. Some specific issues include:

o Section 9(16) refers to "incentives, grants or tax changes to accomplish any of the other recommendations." There is no clarity on whether the terms decided by the commissions will be forced/coerced or voluntary. This language can also potentially allow for the creation of

silos, separating taxing for schools from taxing of town services - this was originally suggested in bill HB 7319. There is no mention of voting on these recommendations by the legislature.

o Section 9(17) states that the commission will provide a report by December 1, 2020 with recommendations for consolidation and school district redistricting. There is no mention of specific thresholds that are being considered: is it under 2,000 students, under 40,000 residents, under 15,000 students? What is the specific criteria, how are we to assume that all districts will not be consolidated? Again, why will the final decisions not be voted on by the legislature?

o Section 9(17)(C) refers to a public hearing, but there is no mention that the findings of this commission are not subject to a vote by the legislature. Why not?

o Section 9(17)(D) says that the commission (which will not terminate until June 30, 2027) may continue to develop additional recommendations, and again those decisions are not subject to a vote by legislature. This looming protracted uncertainty is very detrimental to our local economy.

o Section 9(17)(e) says that "reports and plans developed...shall be submitted to... the General Assembly" but again the decisions of this powerful commission are not subject to a vote by the legislature. Why not?

o Section 10(B) states the Commission will "develop a report on which services will be shared and consolidated" with other municipalities or local or regional schools "including, but not limited to" administrative costs. Again, this language is very open ended and provides unlimited powers to consolidate beyond administrative functions.

\* Rather than "breaking" what is working well and what has worked well historically, why not institute a study of failing schools. Shouldn't the goal here be to improve outcomes rather than just an equalization of all students? Why wouldn't the other companion bills in the House and Senate on consolidation explicitly exclude looking at the very districts (the cities of Hartford, Stamford, Bridgeport, New Haven and Waterbury) that are underperforming? These are the very districts which are represented by the Democrat Leadership that has proposed all these

consolidation bills in the first place. Not setting up a committee to evaluate the issues within these failing school districts defies logic.

\* I understand your goal is to improve the education and outcomes in the urban school districts. It is a good goal if only it were true. However, destroying what works well is not the way to accomplish your objectives. You must consider the harm the changes that you propose will inflict on CT's educational system and CT's economy. Why not hire top educational consultants for the failing districts to determine how you can improve the quality of the education in those districts and the outcomes? Why not appoint a special educational commissioner to oversee those failing districts for the purpose of improving quality and outcomes and hold that person accountable for putting systems in place to accomplish those goals? Why not study what is working at the local level at top performing schools and adopt those best practices that might help elsewhere? I suggest that this is where resources should be deployed.

\* Given that Hartford has failed to properly manage the fiscal affairs of this state for decades, Hartford should focus on fixing dysfunction in the state around the unfunded pension liabilities and enact pension and labor union reforms. Enact contract negotiation reforms, remove prevailing wage rules and enact legislation that would encourage real public-private partnerships.

\* The additional questions raised by this bill are many, including how will resources be allocated once districts are consolidated? How will decisions on spending reflect the wishes of the residents who elect officials? How will one town's priorities be weighed against another town, or city, and what will happen when they do not agree?

In conclusion, I am concerned that this bill or any similar bill, if enacted, will erode the quality of the education in our local schools and will negatively affect the CT economy. Specifically, this bill will deter new families from moving to CT towns and result in many existing families moving to states where there is local control over school districts and high-quality educational programs. Once new families stop moving to CT and existing families leave en masse, new businesses will not be attracted to CT towns and existing businesses will leave, too. This will worsen the state's fiscal crisis and your legacy will have been to destroy the lifeblood of CT.

Nearly 20 years ago, the train rides were shorter, tolls and taxes were not looming over us, the pension issue, though significant, was not as large as it is today, businesses were moving out of

New York to be in Connecticut, and the schools were the big magnet for families. Well, the train ride is longer and more unreliable, taxes are up, and going higher, the pensions are out of control, and all those businesses have been driven out. Many potential and current residents could overlook that, if they believe they are doing right by their children, sending them to great schools. Don't take away the last attractive attribute for families to move to Connecticut.

Please oppose HB 7192 and any other legislation that requires school districts to consolidate and regionalize school services and districts and that mandates regional school taxing districts.

Thank you for your public service and for listening to the people.

Sincerely,

Laura Danforth, New Canaan, CT